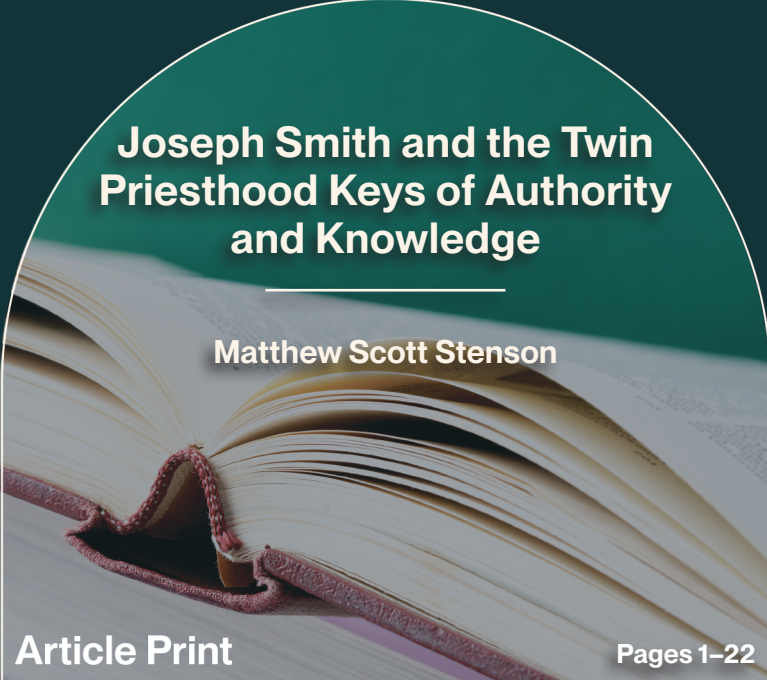


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**Joseph Smith and the Twin
Priesthood Keys of Authority
and Knowledge**

Matthew Scott Stenson

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Joseph Smith and the Twin Priesthood Keys of Authority and Knowledge

Matthew Scott Stenson

Abstract: *This article proposes that priesthood keys are of two general categories: 1) keys of authority and 2) keys of knowledge. The keys of authority are the type most often discussed in meetings and classrooms, and thus, are relatively familiar. However, keys of knowledge, though an extension of the keys of authority, may be less familiar. The word key in this second case is used in a broad sense, including the keys of both knowledge and intelligence, which are richly featured in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants, as well as in the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. After some preliminaries, I examine the keys of authority and the keys of knowledge. Then, I demonstrate that keys of knowledge can also be of two sorts: 1) formally revealed scriptural keys of knowledge and 2) informally revealed non-scriptural keys of knowledge. The paper finishes with a related discussion of the special keys of authority and power (if not also knowledge) that Jesus Christ holds over death, hell, and final judgment.*

The fundamental principles, government, and doctrine of the Church are vested in the keys of the kingdom.

—Joseph Smith¹

In the nineteenth century, the language of keys and the unlocking of hidden meaning was seemingly everywhere in common usage. The use of the term *key* (as in *door key*) is still popularly used as a

1. Alonzo L. Gaskill and Richard G. Moore, eds., *The Revised and Expanded Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2024), 21.

metaphor, but is perhaps increasingly antiquated and may feel stilted in academic circles when applied to literary texts. No longer are literary texts perceived as mere containers of singular meaning that can be unlocked with a hermeneutical key.² That usage is likely a remnant from the centuries-old allegorical tradition.³ The word *key* appears often in nineteenth-century texts of (or related to) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as in the conversational language and literature of the period.⁴ The word *key* was often on the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as were its synonyms, such as *grand secrets* or *starting point*.⁵

When it comes to acquiring understanding, the term *key* is most often used metaphorically to suggest that one has a special and perhaps hitherto undisclosed principle. If used well, this principle allows others to enter into the house of meaning and, by its use, provide a way to explore the endless rooms in the house. Thus, the key of knowledge opens the door to understanding, and potentially has infinite applications, as well as targeted implications.

Accordingly, Joseph Smith understood himself not only to be setting aside the cobwebs of the creeds and the uninspired traditions of the past, but breaking new ground—pioneering a new way forward in the area of religious knowledge. As a seer, Joseph Smith sought to use his God-given gift to bring truths to light, making things known that were previously in the dark. Ammon, a Book of Mormon scout, explains what a seer’s work is in these words:

A seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known.
(Mosiah 8:17)

2. This presupposes that everyone who has the key to the subject or text will arrive at the same conclusion or the same understanding.

3. According to this tradition, an intentionally multilayered text could be unlocked or decoded if one had the proper key to its meaning. The key allowed one to discover “the idea” at the heart of the text.

4. See, for example, Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology: A Voice of Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978).

5. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 397, 399. Examples of Joseph Smith’s use of the term appears in the Latter-day Saint Bible (JST Luke 11:52) and in a Church hymn (“O My Father,” *Hymns*, no. 292, verse 3).

In a colorful passage on the secrets contained in the writings of the Apostle Peter, Joseph Smith likens his own mission, in general, with that of Columbus venturing forth to find the New World:

(There are) 3 grand secrets [keys] lying in this chapter (2 Peter 1) which no man can dig out . . . which unlocks the whole chapter. . . . I am going to take up this subj(e)ct by virtue of the knowledge of God in me. — which I have received fr(o)m heaven. the opinions of men. so far as I am possessed concerned. are to me as the crackling of the thorns under the pot. or the whistli(n)g of the wind. (I break the ground) . . . like Columbus.⁶

It appears that scholars have not yet explored this important dimension of Joseph Smith's ministry in explicit or extensive terms. Nevertheless, this search for the key of knowledge seems to have been of great importance to Joseph Smith, even after the early published revelations grew fewer in number and frequency. His final sermons are saturated with keys to heavenly knowledge or what he often referred to as *intelligence*.

This interest in heavenly knowledge and the priesthood's role in its acquisition extended to Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young, who was a careful student of the Prophet. Brigham Young is reported as once having taught:

An individual who holds a share in the Priesthood, and continues faithful to his calling . . . will secure to himself not only the privilege of receiving, but the knowledge how to receive the things of God, that he may know the mind of God continually; and . . . the Priesthood . . . will continue to increase until it becomes like a fountain of living water . . . one continued source of intelligence and instruction to that individual.⁷

This truth about the keys of the priesthood is one that Brigham Young appears to have learned from his mentor, Joseph Smith.

6. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 397. The unusual transcription marks are informed by the Joseph Smith Papers project. That project and this approach to ambiguities in the earliest texts will inform all subsequent Joseph Smith citations.

7. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 128, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-brigham-young/chapter-18.

It should be understood that Joseph Smith (and his successor) used the terms *wisdom*, *knowledge*, and *intelligence* most often as synonyms, whereas in our day those terms are seldom used in that way.⁸ Instead, *knowing*, in today's Church vernacular, often appears to be less important than *doing* or *being*. But that is not how Joseph Smith understood these concepts or employed that language. For him, *knowledge* was *the* principle of salvation or exaltation; *knowing* was *becoming* like God (see Doctrine and Covenants 131:6; 130:18–19; John 17:3; 2 Peter 1:8). *Wisdom* in our day, though, is customarily associated with well-applied earthly knowledge. Today, properly used knowledge is little more than properly used information. Joseph Smith, in contrast, used words such as *knowledge*, *wisdom*, and *intelligence* to mean *pure intelligence*, much as we currently use the terms *inspiration* and *revelation*. Modern usage of this family of words often no longer refers to keys of knowledge nor to the unlocking of grand ideas. To be sure, knowledge, ironically, can even be disparaged when compared to doing and being.

So, what are the keys of knowledge? In an editorial, Joseph Smith points out that many people are ignorant of ministering spirits. This lack of understanding leaves them open to deception. These well-meaning people of faith may even have experience with supernatural power, yet remain unaware of what is from God and what is not. Joseph Smith asks what is to be done about this situation, and his answer to the dilemma is this: “A *key* is needed, a *rule*, a *critterion* by which one may ‘test’ all manifestations.”⁹ In this message, Joseph Smith identifies several keys for discerning the workings of potentially false spirits. Among them, he indicates that those who experience “power, revelation, or vision” may use certain keys to determine what is of God.¹⁰ One way to know what is from him, Joseph Smith explains, is to ask: Does the manifestation merely lead its recipient to shout “hallelujah” or is “intelligence communicated?”¹¹ In other words, one way to know if a manifestation is from God is that it will leave one enlightened or instructed. The manifestation will communicate substance or truths that expand the understanding. By this key—one of many that Joseph Smith provides—a person may discern what is from God.

8. David A. Bednar, *Increase in Learning: Spiritual Patterns for Obtaining Your Own Answers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011).

9. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 265.

10. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 264.

11. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 264.

Moreover, Joseph Smith also provides keys of knowledge as they pertain to interpreting the scriptures. He explains on one occasion the key for making sense of the parables of Jesus, using the parable of the Prodigal Son as an example. Many moderns, he notes, read the parable as if it has implications for the nations of the Jews or Gentiles. To which he responds, my “rule of interpretati(o)n” is “[j]ust no interpretation at all.”¹² He further clarifies, “I have a Key by whi(c)h I understa(n)d the scripture[s] — I enquire, what was the question whi(c)h drew out the answer.—(or caused Jesus to utter the parable?)”¹³ Further, to “(ascertain a parable’s meaning, we must) dig up the root (and ascertain) what drew . . . the saying out of Jesus.”¹⁴ As mentioned, he explains that this parable does not have national implications, but is best understood as being adapted to an “individual capacity.”¹⁵ Using this “Key,” Joseph Smith explains the parable’s meaning: “This man [Jesus] receiveth sinners — (and eateth with them.)”¹⁶ The Prophet delighted to shed light on the “intricate subjects [of the scriptures]” by providing keys to interpretation.¹⁷ He could provide these keys for his followers because he was not only invested with keys of *authority* but with the right to keys of *knowledge*, knowledge obtained by the Holy Ghost.

As Richard Bushman explains about the beginnings of the Restoration: “The importance of priesthood was not primarily organizational, but grew out of its part in exaltation.”¹⁸ He suggests that the “mystical powers of priesthood [its revelatory powers]” were only gradually “blended with the everyday business of running the church.”¹⁹ Bushman adds that “it took nearly two years for priesthood to emerge as the ruling principle of Church government.”²⁰ It often appears that the order of the evolving and intertwining of these two dimensions of the priesthood — and its keys of authority and knowledge — has been reversed in our day. Latter-day Saints seem to be much more

12. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

13. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

14. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

15. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

16. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

17. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

18. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 258.

19. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 258.

20. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 258.

conscious of a key holder's right to direct the daily "business of the church" and less familiar with the full "potency of the priesthood."

This claim can be demonstrated by merely reviewing the entry for priesthood keys in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.²¹ As a result of this present understanding and emphasis, the current default for the term keys is to describe them as keys of authority or administration instead of considering and utilizing their important role as a channel, conduit, or gateway for the wide dissemination of heavenly knowledge. This includes understanding for the faithful who listen to the instruction of their appointed leaders.

I propose that there is an additional, and possibly nearly forgotten, category for priesthood keys: keys of knowledge. *This is all the more surprising given that the keys of administration and governance are arguably inseparably connected to the keys of new and groundbreaking knowledge.* The keys of knowledge, when they are to be dispensed, are not usually dispensed by priesthood holders in general, nor are they usually possessed or discovered by worthy members in the Church at large. Most often, they are possessed and discovered by those who preside and hold keys of priesthood authority.

To be set apart and given keys is to have a right to revelation and, it would seem, to teach others how to receive the same. Nevertheless, faithful rank-and-file Church members can lay hold of great treasures of knowledge as they employ the keys provided to them by those who discover, possess, and teach them (Doctrine and Covenants 121:26–33).

It may even be that the keys of knowledge can be divided further: between keys identified in the scriptures and non-scripturally identified keys. The second category of keys are scattered among the instructions of Joseph Smith and his successors. Such keys are to be gathered, organized, treasured, and utilized to increase understanding and to improve discipleship.

This discussion begins with a review of scholarship on the question of priesthood keys of authority and knowledge to demonstrate the recent neglect of the second category of keys—those pertaining to knowledge. It will also define certain additional relevant terms. After that, it reviews the restoration of keys of authority or administration before illustrating that Joseph Smith often taught about keys of knowledge and keys of intelligence. To conclude, it briefly describes various

21. Alan K. Parrish, "Keys of the Priesthood," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: MacMillan, 1992), 2:780–81.

keys that have not been delegated to men and women on Earth, but which are reserved for the Lord alone. These keys he has by right of his authority and, it would seem, his knowledge. Specifically, those are the keys of power, authority, dominion, and governance pertaining to death, hell, and the heavens.

Two Standard Categories for Priesthood Keys

As explained earlier, the current way of describing priesthood keys refers almost exclusively to 1) the *keys of authority, administration, and government (ecclesiastical keys)*. This is opposed to what will be termed 2) the *keys of knowledge and intelligence (epistemological keys)*. Much as the entry on priesthood keys in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* referenced earlier, Sheri Dew, in her book on women and the priesthood, defines various truths about that heavenly agency or power. One of the important truths she presents conveys the standard definition for priesthood keys: "Priesthood keys are the manner through which the Lord authorizes and disperses his power and authority throughout the Church for both men and women."²² This standard definition is also how priesthood keys are defined in a book that was widely distributed by the Church, *True to the Faith*.²³ Priesthood authority and power in a Church context almost always centers on the role of the priesthood holder to give service to others. Elder M. Russell Ballard's treatment of the priesthood is representative of this claim.²⁴

None of these standard definitions and commonly associated principles are problematic in any way. They are merely incomplete as they stand because they do not account for the entire doctrine of the priesthood and its keys of knowledge as described in modern revelation and in the teachings of former Church leaders²⁵ and Latter-day Saint scholars.²⁶

Before proceeding, it must be acknowledged that though it is

22. Sheri Dew, *Women and the Priesthood: What One Mormon Woman Believes* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 105.

23. *True to the Faith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 126–27.

24. M. Russell Ballard, *When Thou Art Converted: Continuing Our Search for Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 158–61.

25. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 409–10.

26. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey and Larry E. Dahl (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 332–33.

argued here that priesthood keys fall into two general categories, the subject is complicated and in places untidy and even ambiguous. There is much yet to learn about the assortment of keys that have been bestowed in this dispensation. There is more still to learn about the keys' relationship to one another and their relationship to the worthy servants of the Lord who are set apart to administer the gospel and govern in the Church. This extends to those who, because of their humility and diligence (though not a key holder), may also receive the conceptual keys of knowledge by means of scripture study, heeding priesthood instruction, and experience with the spirit of revelation. In other words, formally appointed key holders may or may not possess sufficient knowledge of the functions of the Holy Ghost to dispense to others the keys to knowledge. It is their right to do so, but not all presiding leaders fully live up to their privileges. Joseph Smith is our example in understanding how the two kinds of priesthood keys may come together in one (or more) persons or presidents.

In their latest book, Elder Dale G. Renlund and his wife, Ruth Lybbert Renlund, in two successive chapters, identify and explain priesthood offices and keys. In the first of these chapters, they write, "The term *priesthood keys* is used in two different ways"²⁷ and they follow by teaching that the keys of knowledge are universally available to those worthy to receive the Aaronic or Melchizedek Priesthood. Accordingly, they seem to see the matter slightly differently from Joseph Fielding McConkie.²⁸ In his article on the subject, McConkie explains that the keys of knowledge are to be understood as *widely available to the members of the Church due to their receipt of the gift of the Holy Ghost and priesthood ordinances*.²⁹ The Renlunds present their own, more particular, view of the matter when they write that all "Aaronic Priesthood holders receive the keys to the ministering of angels and the keys of the preparatory gospel of repentance and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sin" at the time the lesser

27. Dale G. Renlund and Ruth Lybbert Renlund, *The Melchizedek Priesthood: Understanding the Doctrine, Living the Principles* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 26.

28. It will be suggested in this article that the keys of knowledge are neither possessed nor dispensed by all worthy rank-and-file priesthood holders nor by all worthy and accountable members, but that they pertain to those in leadership who hold keys of administration. Nevertheless, these keys may, if used by the rank and file, benefit all who are wise.

29. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Reference Companion*, 332–33.

priesthood is conferred upon them.³⁰ This teaching may raise certain questions because the Renlunds seem to use the term *keys* here in a non-standard way. As a corollary, the Renlunds suggest that those who receive the Melchizedek Priesthood obtain the “key of the mysteries of the kingdom, the key of the knowledge of God, and the keys of all spiritual blessings of the Church.”³¹

To clarify, the Renlunds divide priesthood keys into two kinds. The first kind they describe as pertaining to a “right or privilege” bestowed upon all who receive either of the two priesthoods.³² This right or privilege, according to the Renlunds, has a relationship with receiving the ministering, and presumably the instruction, of angels and even the “mysteries of the kingdom,” not the least of which is the “knowledge of God.”³³ However, this right, which is broad and comprehensive, must be regulated. As they explain, this regulation is the role of the second category of keys. These “additional priesthood keys” confer the “right to preside over an organizational division of the Church or a quorum.” It is these more familiar keys that govern and direct how the other keys are employed, according to the Renlunds. In fact, it is the key holder who, like the coach of a team, must teach and train the others (“players”) who also have a right to the keys of knowledge and blessing. In this way, the Lord empowers all who receive the priesthood, as long as all things are done in proper order. Of course, this assumes that those with keys also have knowledge enough to properly govern how the keys of knowledge (to the extent they are manifest in the body of Christ) are employed for the salvation of the people.

This intriguing glimpse at the keys of knowledge (not keys of administrative authority) whets the appetite but leaves much to the imagination. It perhaps may even confuse the reader because the keys of knowledge are never definitively defined nor described by the Renlunds. Without further discussion of the keys to knowledge by these recognized teachers (one of whom is an Apostle), the Renlunds go on to describe the keys of authority or keys of administration. They write that the keys of authority allow for a priesthood holder to serve as a leader in the Church: “In this regard,” the Renlunds point out, “priesthood keys [of this sort] are the authority and power to direct, lead, and

30. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

31. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

32. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

33. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

govern in the Church.”³⁴ Later they add that these same second-category “keys of presidency,” enable a priesthood holder to “lead, teach, organize, and encourage those over whom they preside.”³⁵ These brief but descriptive statements about priesthood as authority to govern and direct are the standard type of definitions and descriptions found in manuals and classrooms.

The Renlunds do not return to what they had said about the universally available keys obtained by men and women who serve under the authority of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. Their emphasis, thereafter, is that the Apostles share all available keys together and use them in unity with the chief Apostle, or President of the Church.

The subject of keys of knowledge appears to be unfamiliar to, or unexamined by, many people.³⁶ For this reason, and as indicated, the “formal” keys to heavenly knowledge, intelligence, and leadership are never in the hands of any other persons than those who are set apart to preside. However, and this harmonizes with the others’ views, if used wisely and diligently, the benefits of such keys may potentially reach not only to all priesthood holders, but to every member of the Church who has been baptized and has received the gift of the Holy Ghost. The keys to knowledge are not merely delegated or bestowed, but also must be sought, received, and used by those who diligently seek to learn and obey.

Before proceeding further, certain additional terms need to be defined and described. As mentioned above, in Church classroom discussions the definition of *keys* most often revolves around priesthood authority and opportunities to serve others. On occasion, however, priesthood authority is compared to and contrasted with priesthood *power*. And even more rarely (until recently), this authority and power was usually connected exclusively to the priesthood holder without reference to women and youth. However, the latter may also operate with priesthood authority and power and be blessed by that same authority through receipt of ordinances, covenants, and callings. In these situations, authority is said to be the permission and mandate to act in the name of Jesus Christ for the salvation of others.

34. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

35. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 27.

36. This claim is based on the lack of detail on the subject in the sources just cited from Sheri Dew, the Renlunds, the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, and other sources.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks dramatically taught in the April 2014 General Conference:

We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be? . . . Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.³⁷

Whether or not one uses this authority in such a way as to harness the "powers of heaven" depends upon that person living and operating according to the "principles of righteousness" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:36). This heavenly power or agency may bring to pass miracles when used appropriately. As some have noted, even the oath and covenant of the priesthood seems to include "all they who receive this priesthood," which may mean not only all those who receive it by *ordination*, but also all those who receive the legal administrators sent to them (see Hebrews 7:19–21; Doctrine and Covenants 84:35–40).³⁸

Certain keys of the priesthood — those having to do with righteous administration and government of the Church — direct how, when, and for whom authority can be used to benefit a person seeking salvation. Women and youth, when set apart to service under the keys of the priesthood, operate by priesthood authority, if not also by priesthood power.

In summary, it is not a new concept to suggest that priesthood keys are of two kinds or categories. Others have done this before. This distinction between keys of the priesthood can be found not only in the revelations given to Joseph Smith but also in the teachings of Church leaders dating back decades. Nevertheless, current Church culture focuses mostly on authority and its direction, but little, by comparison, on the keys to knowledge and intelligence. Keys are more than a right to serve in a certain administrative capacity such as a presidency, or to direct how, and when, or for whom, authority is used. Significantly, keys are broadly conceived also as a channel or way to knowledge and intelligence that can benefit all members of the Church. Although

37. See Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," *Ensign*, May 2014, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood.

38. Sheri Dew is one who has helped expand our view of the oath and covenant of the priesthood. *Women and the Priesthood*, 127–29.

it is granted that talks and lessons discuss revelation a great deal, and thus, the acquisition of knowledge and intelligence, yet the role that priesthood keys play in the pursuit of heavenly understanding is much less clear.

What follows does not use the term *keys* to refer to *rights or authorities*, but rather as a *way, means, or channel* to heavenly knowledge. The discussion will, in passing, look at keys of authority in their more familiar sense, and then develop a larger, more thoroughgoing discussion about the nature of the priesthood keys of knowledge and intelligence. This will include consideration of the implications of these keys for the rank-and-file member of the Church. In what follows, it is important to understand that, first, I use the term *keys* and its many synonymous iterations more traditionally and, then, more broadly and without exclusive reference to tradition.

Heavenly Angels Restored the Keys of Authority and Knowledge

Priesthood keys of authority and knowledge have been restored to the Earth by the ministering of angels. It is not a mystery which priesthood keys of authority were restored through angelic ministration in this day, the “dispensation of the fulness of times” (Ephesians 1:10; Doctrine and Covenants 121:31; 128:18). The Son of God, by delegation, holds all priesthood keys under our Heavenly Father who presides over all that pertains to his family. Accordingly, Heavenly Father’s priesthood bears the name of the Son — “the Holy Priesthood, after the order of the Son of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:3).³⁹ In like manner, the Son of God has delegated a lesser portion of those keys and authority to his chosen servants, from Father Adam to the present day. The priesthood has apparently been on the Earth from the beginning of time in one form or another, either by lineal descent or angelic ministration. Certainly this is true whenever the Church has been on the Earth (Doctrine and Covenants 84:17). In any case, priesthood is eternal.

The Doctrine and Covenants teaches that the keys of authority — and by means of them, the keys of knowledge and intelligence — were restored in modern times by angelic ministration to Joseph Smith and his associates. John the Baptist, under the keys of presidency and

39. This priesthood is now called *Melchizedek* or the *Melchizedek Priesthood*. See Doctrine and Covenants 104:1–2.

administration held by the ancient apostles Peter, James, and John, bestowed keys pertaining to the ministering of angels and of the gospel of repentance upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. This was in response to their seeking for further light and truth about the ordinance of baptism (Doctrine and Covenants 13). In later revelations, Peter, James, and John bestowed the apostolic keys of the kingdom on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery (Doctrine and Covenants 27:12).

In the Kirtland temple, on 3 April 1836, the Lord appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. They were also visited on this occasion by Moses, Elias, and Elijah, so these ancient servants of God might reveal the keys of the priesthood they held (Doctrine and Covenants 110:1–16). Moses restored the keys of authority pertaining to the “gathering of Israel” (v. 11); Elias restored the keys of authority pertaining to the “dispensation of the gospel of Abraham” (v. 12); and Elijah restored the keys of authority pertaining to “turn[ing] the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers” (v. 15) — the same authority that allows families to be sealed together forever and the same that seals a person up to eternal life (v. 15). This sealing power, exercised in temples, also makes permanent and binding all priesthood ordinances sealed by the “Holy Spirit of Promise” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:7).

At the same time that these keys of authority were restored, it appears that new knowledge also came into the world. When the Lord or his angels minister, they do not only bestow authority by the laying on of hands, but they also instruct those they authorize. Based on a sermon attributed to Mormon, the angels, sent by the Son, minister to and instruct “chosen vessels” (Moroni 7:31). These chosen vessels, who are legal administrators of the gospel, impart authority and heavenly truth to the “residue of men” (Moroni 7:32). This pattern is most clearly observed by remembering that the angel Moroni, who holds the keys of the Book of Mormon record (Doctrine and Covenants 27:5) not only authorized Joseph Smith to bring forth the Book of Mormon but also taught him many prophecies to prepare him for his subsequent work (see Joseph Smith — History 1:33–41). Angels prepare the way in order that the covenants of the Lord may be fulfilled.

Joseph Smith entertained many angels during his ministry, including visitations of the Father and the Son. Each angel, it appears, bestowed upon Joseph’s head their keys of authority or imparted heavenly instruction. But what about the keys of knowledge and intelligence? To proceed, it is necessary to discuss Joseph Smith as a

“chosen vessel” of the Lord before more fully laying out what is meant by the keys of knowledge and intelligence.

The Keys of Knowledge and Intelligence

Joseph Smith was chosen by the Lord to head this current and last gospel dispensation. He holds the keys over it and will forever (see Doctrine and Covenants 90:2–5). This is a dispensation in which all keys, rights, authority, and powers known to any previous dispensation have been or will be restored. Inherent in these keys of authority are keys to receive and dispense knowledge and intelligence. The keys pertaining to heavenly knowledge are often referenced in the revelations, and they have a direct relationship to the right of presidency and government of the Church. Joseph Smith, by virtue of the priesthood keys he held, became a fount of knowledge to the Latter-day Saints.

These keys of knowledge and intelligence, which Joseph Smith received from the Lord and dispensed to others, may also be placed into two additional categories: 1) general, formal keys to knowledge and intelligence, and 2) specific, informal keys to knowledge and intelligence. The formal keys pertaining to knowledge and intelligence are not often directly discussed outside the Doctrine and Covenants. The following collection of references demonstrates that these non-administrative keys to acquiring knowledge and wisdom are gifts granted only to those who preside in the Church, unless otherwise delegated, transmitted, or shared. The list of keys below is not exhaustive, but does demonstrate the variety of ways that keys of knowledge have been described (or suggested) in modern revelation:

- Keys of the translation of ancient records (Doctrine and Covenants 6:28).
- Keys of the “ministering of angels” and preparatory gospel (Doctrine and Covenants 13:1; 84:26).⁴⁰
- Keys of the restoration of all things spoken by the prophets (Doctrine and Covenants 27:6).
- Keys of gathering together all things in one (Doctrine and Covenants 27:13).⁴¹

40. When angels visit, they often impart instruction (examples include Moses 5:6–8; 1 Nephi 11:14–34; 2 Nephi 10:3; Mosiah 3:2–22; Mosiah 27:11–31). As noted previously, in each of the visits of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith, he instructed him at great length in the prophecies and purposes of the Lord.

41. It appears to have been understood in the early years of the Church that “the gathering” meant the gathering not only of people to places, but of all the

- Keys of revelation to the Church and to receiving the mysteries of God and his kingdom (Doctrine and Covenants 25:9; 28:7; 35:17–18, 20; 42:61–69; 43:12–14; 64:5; 84:19; 90:14; 107:19).
- Keys of the knowledge of God and all spiritual blessings (Doctrine and Covenants 84:19; 107:18).
- Keys of the “oracles” (or revelations; Doctrine and Covenants 90:4)
- Keys of the “school of the prophets” (Doctrine and Covenants 90:7).
- Keys of blessing the Church (Doctrine and Covenants 107:39; 110:12).
- Keys of revealing priesthood ordinances and turning hearts (Doctrine and Covenants 2:1; 110:14–16).⁴²
- Keys to “ask and receive” (Doctrine and Covenants 124:95–99).
- Keys of recording and transmitting knowledge on Earth and in heaven (Doctrine and Covenants 128:14).

The formal keys of knowledge, more or less chronologically arranged above, are held by chosen vessels for the benefit of Church members and others. The average lay member does not hold these particular keys but should, where possible, seek to benefit from them (Doctrine and Covenants 122:1–4). For instance, the Aaronic Priesthood holds the keys of the “ministering of angels” (Doctrine and Covenants 13:1). But what may that mean? One way to understand these keys is that those who preside over this priesthood may authorize certain others to provide the sacrament for the members of the Church.⁴³ The members who receive the sacrament, as a result of the keys held by the bishop, may thereby receive angels and may learn of such matters that will help prepare them for the blessings of the higher priesthood.

truths of the Earth to Zion. Knowledge was to be gathered up and brought to Zion. (See Doctrine and Covenants 42:61–69; 121:26–33.)

42. Priesthood ordinances are gateways to the grace and gifts of God, including the gift of knowledge. Once ordinances are received and associated covenants obeyed, power, instruction, and blessings may flow into a person’s life.

43. In a ward setting, certain keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood and its use are held by the bishop, the teacher’s quorum president, and the deacon’s quorum president. Before a bishop is called, ordained, and set apart by his stake president, approval is sought and granted from the First Presidency of the Church. That is because a bishop is both the presiding high priest in his ward and the president of the Aaronic Priesthood.

The sacrament, then, is directed by priesthood keys of authority. It simultaneously prepares the way for members, once purified of sin, to receive angels and treasures of knowledge through the Holy Ghost. The ordinance prepares members for higher and holier opportunities and associations.

Similarly, those holding the keys of the higher ordinances can help make a way for those who desire to receive the blessings of the holy temple, which blessings may eventually involve association with more than angels, in due time having the privilege to behold the Lord himself, face to face (see *Doctrine and Covenants* 110:7). These are two important ways to understand what it may mean for holders of the Aaronic Priesthood to exercise the “keys of the ministering of angels” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 13:1) and for those who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood to exercise the “key of the knowledge of God” and the “keys . . . of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 84:19; 107:18–19). The next section provides specific examples of informal keys to knowledge acquisition.

Joseph Smith and Two Examples of Keys of Knowledge

Along with the familiar priesthood keys of authority and less familiar priesthood keys of knowledge and intelligence, there are many instances in which those who preside have intentionally provided particular keys to knowledge, interpretation, and understanding. These keys of knowledge are given to the Church by means of those who preside. Put another way, new knowledge comes to the Church through the channel of priesthood keys, and this happens by divine design. The man who holds priesthood keys to lead and “administer . . . the gospel” may also act as a conduit for dispensing keys or conceptual principles that unlock the “mysteries of the kingdom, even the . . . knowledge of God” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 84:19). It is also by reason of these keys that ordinances are performed, which make available the companionship of the Holy Ghost (a revelator) and the enjoyment of the gifts of wisdom and knowledge. Until the key is “turned,” though, these gifts cannot be fully enjoyed by Church members.

There is a special and exclusive sense in which the ordained President of the Church — and others to whom he delegates keys — have a divine right to receive revelatory knowledge, declare doctrine, and, if needed, break new ground. This section of the article will provide two examples (one formal or scriptural, one informal or non-scriptural) from the collective and associated keys of knowledge and

intelligence. These will be described before turning to the heavenly priesthood keys of authority, exclusively held by the Lord in his foreordained and authorized role as Redeemer and Savior under the keys and authority of the Father.

Scriptural examples

In Doctrine and Covenants 129, certain keys for detecting false messengers are revealed to the Church. In these "instructions," Joseph Smith makes known "three grand keys" (v. 9), which teach members that "ministering angels and spirits" are of two sorts: 1) reembodied resurrected beings; and 2) disembodied ministering spirits (vv. 1, 3). Joseph Smith explains that "When a messenger comes saying he has a message from God, offer him your hand and request him to shake hands with you" (v. 4). Once the hand is offered, Joseph Smith says there are three ways of detection: 1) "If he [the messenger] be an angel"; 2) "If he be the spirit of a just man made perfect"; and 3) "If it [he] be the devil" (vv. 5–6, 8). The instruction concludes as follows: "These are the three grand keys whereby you may know whether any administration is from God" (v. 9).

These verses are a canonical example demonstrating where one in authority offers specific instruction to others to benefit them in detecting truth and avoiding deception. This was no doubt based on the revelations and experiences of Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith enjoyed and delegated such keys of knowledge and intelligence, exercising his right to act as authoritative teacher to the Church. The material in Doctrine and Covenants 129 is not presented as revelation from God, but as inspired instruction to members of the Church. Nevertheless, the right to offer these "grand keys" to the Church is a function of the keys of knowledge inherent in the keys of the priesthood. Joseph Smith was able to do this not merely because he was intelligent or a spiritually minded man, but because he, through angelic ministrations, held the keys to offer keys of knowledge.

In addition to the keys of knowledge in the present canon of scripture, Joseph Smith also liberally distributed extra-canonical keys of knowledge. He did this both explicitly and implicitly as a function of his role as the presiding leader of the Church. Scores of examples could be identified and cited, but only one is provided in what follows.

Non-scriptural examples

One of many non-scriptural examples of Joseph Smith's distribution of

keys to knowledge and intelligence can be extracted from his teachings about the Apostle Peter (referenced earlier). In 2 Peter 1, Peter exhorts the Saints of his day to add to their faith one virtue upon another until they come to a “knowledge of our Lord, Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8). In his 1843 exposition of Peter’s writings, Joseph Smith explains to his audience that Peter provides them only “hints of things which ex(ist)ed in the prophet[’]s mind. which are not written. Concerning eternal glory.”⁴⁴ In this context, Joseph Smith explains, “I break the ground,” perhaps meaning that as President of the Church, Joseph Smith would proffer interpretive principles whereby the Saints may come to understand Peter’s subject for themselves.

Joseph Smith asks his audience, if they are to understand Peter, “What is the secret—the starting point?” He identifies the starting point—or key to this knowledge—as *knowledge through the power of God*, what Peter calls “His [God’s] divine power.” After a few other related remarks, Joseph Smith succinctly sums up the “three grand secrets” to understanding Peter’s difficult teachings:

<1 Key> Knowledge i(s) the power of Salvati(o)n. <2 Key> Make his calling and Election Sure. 3 [Key] It is one thing to be on the mount. & hear the excellent voice [etc.], and another <to hear the> voice de(c)lare to you, You have a part & lot in that kingdom.⁴⁵

Again, it should be noted that to provide a key or series of keys is not to gain everything; to have a key still requires the listener to use the key if he or she is to learn what is inside the room that stores that particular treasure of wisdom and knowledge. The learner still has to ask, seek, and knock in order to obtain.

In this teaching, Joseph Smith does not interpret Peter’s writings for his listeners, going verse by verse as scriptural commentaries tend to do. Instead, he provides them with specific concepts, principles, or keys whereby they might come to understand Peter’s prophetic point and invitation more completely based upon their own further effort and inquiry. Joseph Smith is acting in his role as a key holder when he teaches about these keys for interpretation and knowledge. This is his right and prerogative insofar as he is enlightened enough to do so and assuming that the audience is also prepared for the particular lesson. The Prophet is not specifically administering the gospel so much as

44. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 397.

45. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 400.

providing, in an informal yet explicit way, a means to comprehend the mysteries of God. This is an important aspect of his duty as Church leader. This may be replicated throughout the Church, wherever there is a key holder or one appointed by a key holder to teach.

In summary, priesthood keys of knowledge are of two primary sorts, ecclesiastical and epistemological. Interestingly, this second type of keys may also profitably be divided into two additional sub-categories: formal ways of knowing and informal ways of knowing. The second of these sub-categories can be called non-scriptural keys provided by Joseph Smith as an authorized leader and teacher. It is asserted here that these many scriptural and non-scriptural keys to knowledge and intelligence fall under the priesthood keys of authority, governance, and administration belonging to Joseph Smith, his successors, and others who preside in the Church at the stake and ward/branch level. Thus, it may be said that these keys naturally reach to all members of the Church as leaders do not have a monopoly on the acquisition of saving knowledge. They are, as key holders, in a position to provide certain additional conceptual keys to further the knowledge of the Saints, either directly or by means of those they call and set apart.

Jesus Christ Holds the Keys of Death, Hell, and Final Judgment

Although Joseph Smith received keys of authority and knowledge from angels sent to him from past gospel dispensations, neither he nor his successors possess all priesthood keys. The Lord holds priesthood keys of authority beyond those possessed by the legal administrators he has chosen. Most Christians are aware that Jesus Christ received power from his Father to break the bands of death and to rise again from the tomb. Many are also aware that the power to rise from the dead in resurrection will eventually pass upon all people. However, Latter-day Saint Christians additionally believe that the vast majority of the dead, before inheriting one of the three kingdoms of glory prepared for them, will be raised in their resurrected bodies to be judged. Finally, it is widely believed by Christians that all people will stand before Jesus Christ to be judged. This is the case because the Lord holds the keys of authority pertaining to this final judgment. The scripture says that "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son" (John 5:22–23).

All that Jesus Christ accomplished was in service to his Father, who first called and commissioned him to the priesthood in the premortal

realms and in this second estate. He became a high priest forever (see Hebrews 5:5–6; Alma 13:8–9). In his relationship with the Father, the Lord did only those things that pleased him. He was authorized with priesthood power and endowed, as a result, with heavenly knowledge that enabled him to carry out and complete his mission on Earth and beyond the veil. The Lord was the messenger of the Father and taught his gospel to all who would receive his teachings. Many of his sayings were eventually written down. To this day, they expand our views and provide insights into heavenly truths. As a resurrected personage, the Lord continues to labor for the salvation of his Father’s children. According to his calling and commission, he continues to seek to perfect the work his Father has delegated to him. The keys of authority that fall to him are more extensive than those possessed by any of his followers. In fact, he alone holds the keys of death and hell (resurrection and atonement; see 2 Nephi 9:10, 10:25).

What may it mean that the Lord holds the “keys of hell” (Revelation 1:18)?⁴⁶ As a final contribution to this discussion, this doctrine can be briefly explained. This doctrine is not unrelated to the doctrine of deliverance from temporal death. Latter-day Saints believe that those persons under condemnation for transgressing divine law, if unrepentant, must suffer their portion in hell, subsequent to their time on Earth (see Doctrine and Covenants 19:1–20). Hell is a place and state of torment reserved for the devil and his angels and all “they who subject themselves unto him” (Moroni 7:17). However, the revelations indicate that, for the vast majority of the unbelieving and rebellious inhabitants of the Earth, there will be an end to their suffering (see Doctrine and Covenants 19:4–12). They will be delivered when they have learned obedience, for “all will suffer until they learn to obey Christ.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, in time, through the Lord and his keys of authority to open hell’s gates, all will be delivered from their torment, except those who are counted sons of perdition. These rebels alone will remain there.

Because of the Lord’s keys of authority, the gates of hell are opened by him who suffered that he might obtain the “rights of mercy” (Moroni 7:27). These “rights” (an indication of his authority) seem to have relationship to the Lord’s experiential knowledge according to the flesh

46. For more on this subject, see Janet Ewell, “Easter and Doctrine and Covenants 138: Our Harrowing of Hell, Our Decensus *Christi ad Inferos*, Our Anastasis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 68 (2026), 243–88.

47. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 470.

(see 2 Nephi 9:21–22; Alma 7:10–13). That is, he has a right to offer mercy to the penitent because he paid for our sins, having experienced all things in the flesh. The keys of hell and final judgment are solely in the hands of Jesus Christ. None other holds them. His atoning experiences qualify him as our final judge (see John 5:22; Mosiah 3:10).⁴⁸

King David understood many of these truths and thus obtained the promise that, in due time, he would be delivered from hell. This merciful promise obtained by David seems to be what Isaiah refers to as the "sure mercies of David" (Isaiah 55:3). In reality, though, in due time, all but a few rebels will find deliverance from hell because of the Lord. This same doctrine was confirmed by Peter (see Acts 2:25–36). These truths appear to explain why it is, that in the end, "every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess" that Jesus is God — their Christ, their Savior, and their Redeemer (Mosiah 27:31). In the end, all who will receive, shall enjoy one of three kingdoms of glory through the "merits, mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah" (2 Nephi 2:8). Alma, son of Alma, learned this doctrine, which he expressed after his sore repentance and spiritual re-birth, being released from the "pains of hell" (Alma 36:12–18; see also Mosiah 27:23–29).

Summary and Conclusions

Much has come through the restoration of the gospel and the priesthood. Angels have visited the Earth and have delivered priesthood keys to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Those priesthood keys are of two sorts, and the ones most often discussed in the Church are those having to do with authority and administration. However, according to the revelations given to Joseph Smith, priesthood keys also function as a means to gain knowledge and intelligence, in addition to the right to preside and direct authority. A fullness of the authority of Heavenly Father has been delegated to his Son, Jesus Christ. Through him and his angelic servants, the Lord has conferred a portion of that authority and its attendant keys upon the heads of certain chosen vessels, such as Joseph Smith and his associates and successors.

Inherent in these keys for directing priesthood authority, administration, and government, the keys of knowledge and intelligence have been granted. This suggests an order to revelation in the kingdom of

48. It is common knowledge among Christians that Jesus Christ is our final judge. Most Christians believe and teach this idea. What the angel teaches King Benjamin in Mosiah 3:3–10 is why this is so. The Lord has the right to act as our final judge in part because of what he has experienced (Mosiah 3:5–9).

God. That is, leaders who magnify their callings may act as dispensers and facilitators of knowledge. This is not to say that Latter-day Saints cannot learn much, even *all* that their leaders know, through the gift of the Holy Ghost and personal revelation, for they can. However, it does suggest that until one with keys to direct the performance of certain ordinances by proper authority performs his part, even that superlative gift—the formal gift of the Holy Ghost—cannot be enjoyed. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are made available through the authority of God, as that authority is directed by keys of presidency. Furthermore, those who preside may also receive revelation pertaining to those for whom they have stewardship. In addition, they may wish to teach principles (or “conceptual keys”) when teaching, which can help the Saints exponentially acquire more understanding. Joseph Smith often demonstrated this vital dimension of priesthood leadership.

Finally, I have attempted to show that certain keys and authority have been retained by the Lord. For instance, he alone holds the keys of death and hell and of an entrance into the heavenly kingdoms of glory. He is “the keeper of the gate” and “he employeth no servant there” (2 Nephi 9:41). Without the Lord, we would not have the hope of a resurrection. Without the Lord, we would not have the expectation of a righteous judgment. Without the Lord, we would not have hope for a “better world” (Ether 12:4, 8, 32). The Lord Jesus Christ has prepared the way. In this, and in all other essential ways, he broke the ground and made ready all things for the children of God. This he assured his faithful disciples before his death (see John 14:1–6). Thus, he declared to them: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).



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